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University of Dayton

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Monday January 30, 2017

## Making a Difference

“I got a job today,” she said. “And I got offered a place to live.”

Inside the St. Vincent de Paul homeless shelter in Dayton, a small group of women cheered those two life-changing sentences.

It was the start of a support group led by University of Dayton students in a small room decorated with handmade paper stars hanging from the ceiling and completed puzzles taped to the walls.

The students are there five days a week to offer help managing stress, training on computers and preparation for the GED.

Their immediate aim: Empower the women, enhance their coping abilities and improve the social climate of the shelter. Across town, they have the same goals at the Gateway Shelter for Men.

Their work is led by University of Dayton professor Roger Reeb as part of his research on “behavioral activation” — the idea that a program or experience can improve someone’s thoughts, mood and behavior, and help them to recognize and pursue opportunities in the future.

“The goal is lasting change,” said graduate student Bernadette O’Koon.

That lasting change is for shelter guests to ultimately find employment and a home.

### ‘Rays of hope’

The project started four years ago when Reeb, a licensed clinical psychologist, formed a partnership with David Bohardt, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul. The two wanted to find a way to improve job and housing retention rates, while dealing with constrained resources.

St. Vincent serves more than 100,000 people each year — 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



The shelters offer temporary emergency housing for as many as 400 men, women and children on any given night. The nonprofit also provides food, showers, clothing and a caseworker to help each person or family secure a permanent place to live.

The guests regularly move on, but Bohardt says 40 percent return within two years. Most people at his shelters face challenges with employment, he says. He also estimates 60 percent self-report mental illness, 40 percent suffer from drug or alcohol abuse, and at least 30 percent have criminal histories (often involving past incarceration).

The students can be “rays of hope,” Bohardt says. The students — 20 to 30 or more participate in a semester supervised by graduate students — say they are inspired by the interactions too.



“I’ve realized how similar we are,” said Nate Bloss, a recent graduate of psychology. “It’s just the circumstances they were given that led them here.”

Bloss admits he was intimidated the first time he entered the men’s shelter, which is housed in a former prison building still surrounded by barbed wire fencing and guard towers. But soon, any stigma he had of the people inside lifted.

He said he will always remember meeting a gentleman sitting in the corner reading a book. In their conversations, he learned the man knew three languages and often quoted poets.

“I would be kind of embarrassed because I didn’t know the poets,” Bloss said with a smile. “Then one day, he wasn’t there anymore. He worked hard to move on. He deserved it.”

Lizzy Miller, an undergraduate studying early childhood education, also said she was struck by how much she found in common with the men. She loves to draw, and one man she often spent time with was exceptional at it. She wants to be a first-grade teacher and he was working to get a job, as well.

“We’re both trying to figure out how we can get to the place we want to be,” she said. “We can share how our day has been going and we can also play a boardgame to forget everything for a moment.”

### **‘A place of opportunity’**

Reeb said the project is about making the shelters a “place of opportunity” instead of one of despair. On any given day, students do so through casual conversations or rounds of cards. They might offer mediation sessions to relieve stress and anxiety. Or refer someone to a much-needed resource in the community, such as the free clinic. Or work with someone on creating a resume or applying for a job.

Their interactions are guided by the shelter guidelines of respect, empathy and confidentiality. When students meet someone, that person might have been staying at the shelter for just hours or for several days. It might be their first time there or their sixth stay.

“The shelter guest might say of a student: ‘He seems like a nice guy. He won’t judge me. He can help me to help myself.’ Then, that person is not waiting on the system for help, but they are working with our students to pursue opportunities,” said Reeb, the University’s Roesch Chair in the Social Sciences and research associate for the Human Rights Center.

Students, who come from a variety of majors including social sciences, engineering and pre-medicine, prepare for the experience in Reeb’s class. They learn safety procedures and review St. Vincent’s code of conduct. The project goes year round, including summers and holiday breaks, and some students continue with it for the remainder of their undergraduate careers.

## The future

The results of the project so far are positive, according to data gathered by students through surveys and analyzed by Greg Elvers, an associate professor of psychology at the University.

More than 1,000 men and women at the shelters have participated in the project. They rate the programs as enjoyable, meaningful, important and worth repeating. And they feel the programs have improved their hope, mood and motivation.



Reeb also is monitoring the impact on students — whether they are less likely to stigmatize and more likely to recognize and understand their own privilege once the semester ends. He also asks whether the project impacts their feelings that they can make a difference in the community.

In the next phase of the project, Reeb and Bohardt hope to follow as many people as possible as they leave the shelter to track their employment and housing situations. He will compare their outcomes to people who stayed at the shelter but did not participate in the project, people who stayed at the shelter before the project began, and people at similar shelters in other areas.

“If we can prove our efforts made a difference here, we can offer a model for homeless shelters in other communities,” he said.

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